Historical Papers
Communications historiques

Laurier, Aylesworth, and the Decline of the Liberal Party in Ontario

P. D. Stevens

Volume 3, numéro 1, 1968

Calgary 1968

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030691ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/030691ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)
1712-9109 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Stevens, P. D. (1968). Laurier, Aylesworth, and the Decline of the Liberal Party in Ontario. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, *3*(1), 94–113. https://doi.org/10.7202/030691ar

LAURIER, AYLESWORTH, AND THE DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL PARTY IN ONTARIO

P. D. STEVENS
York University

The Liberal party collapsed in Ontario in 1911. This was one of the most significant developments in Canadian political history for it resulted in the defeat of the Laurier government. Yet historians have failed to provide an adequate explanation. They have generally attributed the débâcle to reciprocity, although the proposal should have been popular in rural Ontario; or to charges of disloyalty to the British Empire, although Laurier and the Liberal party had survived a more blatant Anglophile and Francophobe campaign in 1900. For the most part they have overlooked the role which regional and provincial leaders play in the Canadian political system. Reciprocity might or might not have brought economic prosperity to Ontario and the Dominion. It might or might not have been destructive of a Canadian nationality. But in the face of growing skepticism about the nature of Laurier Liberalism and the social and political values of its chief spokesman in the province, the people of Ontario put the American temptation behind them. At a time when leadership was essential, the Liberal party in Ontario was found lacking.

Ontario had been a predominently Conservative province in national politics since Confederation. By the beginning of the 1890's, however, it was turning toward the Liberal banner. Laurier played a leading role in this transfer of political allegiance. In 1887 he had hesitated to accept the party leadership because he believed that a French-Canadian Roman Catholic leader would be a handicap in the English-speaking provinces, particularly in Ontario. But after assuming the leadership, he persistently pursued an Ontario policy to minimize the disabilities of his racial and religious background. He adopted a platform of unrestricted reciprocity to gain political support in the province. During the Manitoba school controversy, he maintained a position consistent with the principles of provincial rights and non-denominational schools, the twin pillars of Ontario Liberalism for over two generations. And in response to imperialist pressures from the province, his government introduced the preferential tariff and

agreed to assist Great Britain against the Boers in South Africa. By the end of the decade Ontario had become a Liberal province.[1]

But federal politics in Canada involves more than national policies and national leaders. The task of leadership in a national political party is particularly onerous because of the deeply-rooted regionalism with permeates Canadian life. The centrifugal forces of race and creed have been reinforced by geographical divisions, economic differentiation, and the beckoning smile of a wealthier neighbour. National parties have therefore been to a large extent merely the momentary reflections and temporary alliances of heterogeneous provincial organizations. The Liberal party remained essentially in this condition until 1896, anti-Catholic, anti-French Ontario Grits in an uneasy alliance with anti-clerical Quebec Liberals. Although Edward Blake and Laurier had begun to rid the party of its separate provincial outlooks and to formulate policies which would attract support from Ontario and Quebec, the ideology and traditions of the Grits and Rouges had not been obliterated, and it was of the utmost importance that the Liberals have effective leaders from both provinces to hold their followers in line. For Ontario the fact that Laurier was a French-Canadian Roman Catholic made this essential. John Willison reflected the views of many when he noted during the Autonomy Bill's debate: "I do not think it just, but it is nevertheless the fact, that a Protestant leader could do what Sir Wilfrid Laurier is doing much more safely, and that many Liberals will remember what they regard as the treason to their principles of a Roman Catholic, when they would not so remember if their leader were a Protestant." [2]

One of the reasons for the success of the Liberal party in Ontario during the latter part of the 1890's was Sir Oliver Mowat's decision to become federal leader in the province. Liberal strategists portrayed Mowat as an English co-premier during the election campaign of 1896, while Laurier spoke rapturously of the days of Baldwin and Lafontaine. After Mowat's resignation in 1897, one of Laurier's weaknesses in Ontario was his inability to find a leader who could inspire a similar confidence. The stalwart old warhorses of Ontario Liberalism, Sir Richard Cartwright, David Mills, John Charlton, Richard Scott and William Paterson were all in the twilight of their political careers; and William Mulock, though an effective administrator,

[1] At the dissolution of Parliament in 1900 the Liberals held 52 seats in Ontario. Of the 52, six had been won by McCarthyites and Patrons in 1896 but were regarded as Liberal by 1900. In addition, the Liberals had gained four seats from the Conservatives in by-elections since 1896.

[2] Public Archives of Canada, J. S. Willison Papers, Willison to R. L. Borden, April 22, 1905.

lacked the oratorical force and eloquence necessary to a man who sought political power. The loss of 16 constituencies in Ontario in the election of 1900 was in part a reflection of the belief that the Liberal party was dominated by Quebec and under the influence of individuals whose Liberalism was incompatible with the province's social and political values.[3] "Our province is hopelessly overborne in the councils of the Liberal party by the strong delegations from Quebec and the East," observed one member of the Ontario caucus, "and the resultant effect upon Ontario is that of apathy and indifference throughout our ranks." [4]

The man whom Laurier selected as "political boss" in Ontario was Allan Aylesworth. The son of an eastern Ontario farmer of United Empire Loyalist stock, Aylesworth was imbued with the contempt and scorn of the Upper Canadian reformer for the despotism of the Family Compact and the aggressive tendencies of a centralized authority. He was a brilliant student at the University of Toronto and rose quickly to a prominent position at the Ontario Bar. In 1903 he was one of Canada's nominees on the Alaska Boundary Tribunal, and his refusal to sign the tribunal award won him popular acclaim. Since 1900 Laurier and his Ontario strategists had been attempting to induce Aylesworth to enter federal politics.[5] Optimism was widespread that Aylesworth could provide "the vitalizing influence necessary to raise the party in public esteem and restore its former prestige." [6] Aylesworth, however, was reluctant to relinquish his briefs until he had provided for the future of his sons; [7] and, when in the general election of 1904, he agreed to take the plunge, he was defeated in the eastern Ontario constituency of Durham. In October 1905 he finally entered the House when Mulock resigned after a by-election in York North. He immediately became Postmaster General and eight months later succeeded Charles Fitzpatrick as Minister of Justice.

Aylesworth was well suited for the position of chief lieutenant in Ontario in many ways. Laurier and Aylesworth were intellectually and temperamentally congenial; and in Aylesworth, Laurier had discovered a colleague to whom he could give his complete trust. On most of the important issues of the day, and particularly on the

[3] For an analysis of this election campaign see Paul D. Stevens, "Laurier and the Liberal Party in Ontario, 1887-1911" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1966), chapter IV.

[4] P.A.C., Wilfrid Laurier Papers, George D. Grant to Laurier, May 26, 1904.

[5] *Ibid.*, Laurier to Charles Murphy, November 10, 1903; Charles Hyman to Laurier, January 20, 1904.

[6] *Ibid.*, Charles Murphy to Laurier, November 9, 1903.

[7] *Ibid.*, Laurier to W. S. Calvert, February 19, 1906.

subject of imperialism, the two had common principles and common opinions.[8] Like Mowat, Aylesworth's Reform credentials were impressive. He was a staunch defender of provincial rights and economy and efficiency in government. Although his political support came primarily from the farming population, he had roots in the business and financial community through his legal practice. He was a strong orator on the political platform, accurate, lucid and disarmingly frank, and his speeches were continuously dignified and convincing. "I have never listened to any Ontario minister who enthused Liberals as he did" applauded one Ontario Liberal. "He simply electrified the electors here, both Grits and Tories." [9]

Aylesworth's task was not enviable. The Liberal party in Ontario was demoralized and dispirited when he entered the federal cabinet. For a generation of Liberals, schooled in the tradition that their party was the custodian of political purity and public morality, the charges of electoral corruption against the provincial administration of George Ross following the election of 1902, and Ross' reluctance to introduce effective legislation to control the sale of liquor, were a rude awakening. "Ontario has lost something of her ascendancy in the Canadian Confederation," declared one prominent political observer. "She has lost in political leadership, in political vigour, in public spirit, and in moral purpose." [10] The defeat of the Liberals in 1905 was overwhelming. As the Governor-General, Lord Grey, noted, "it was not a party vote, it was the uprising of an honest and indignant people who have given warning in the most emphatic manner that they will not tolerate dishonest government." [11]

In the federal field as well, Liberals found themselves under heavy attack for abandoning the traditions of their Clear Grit heritage. Many Liberals maintained that the educational clauses in the Autonomy Bills of 1905, securing separate schools in Saskatchewan and Alberta, violated the principle of provincial rights.[12] What heightened the disillusionment of many Liberals in Ontario was the widespread belief that Laurier's Manitoba school policy had been based on provincial rights and opposed to denominational schools. Willison later explained that his early esteem for the Liberal leader had been based "on his devotion to the federal principle and his resolute resistance to clerical interference in education... With the Western

[8] *The Globe*, October 15, 1904.
[9] Laurier Papers, C. M. Bowman to Laurier, October 31, 1906.
[10] J. S. Willison, "The Party System of Government," *Proceedings of the Canadian Club*, February 15, 1904, p. 72.
[11] Grey of Howick Papers, Grey to Alfred Lyttleton, February 13, 1905.
[12] Laurier Papers, James McMullen to Laurier, March 9, 1905.

Autonomy Acts he turned squarely in the other direction." [13] Laurier, in fact, was not opposed to denominational schools, and on several occasions during the 1890's he had pointed out that provincial rights were abbreviated in the field of education.[14] Nonetheless, disconcerted Laurier supporters deplored that "the hierarchy, the modern Rouges (who have changed their colour somewhat) and the Irish agitators, have a better key to his heart than native British sentiment in Canada." [15] Willison, for one, severed his allegiance with Laurier and the federal Liberal party in protest.[16]

Aylesworth stepped into the political arena to stem the tide. Almost immediately he was confronted with a further deterioration of public confidence in Laurier Liberalism. Between 1905 and 1908, the Laurier government's administration of the country's business was the subject of a succession of opposition charges and allegations. In the sessions of 1906, 1907, and 1908, Conservative leaders waged war on Clifford Sifton's stewardship of the Interior Department prior to his resignation in 1905. Charges that the Department had sold 250,000 acres of choice land to members of the House and their friends at unduly low rates; that the Department had entered into a contract with the North Atlantic Trading Company, a group of European Shipping Agents, to bring immigrants to Canada at the rate of five dollars per head; and that the Department had granted to a syndicate of Sifton's friends a timber limit belonging to the Indian Department at Algoma were all laid at the government's doorstep. In 1908 a commission headed by Mr. Justice W. G. P. Cassells turned up evidence of petty graft in the Department of Marine and Fisheries involving a number of high-ranking civil servants. More serious politically were charges against the personal conduct of the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sir Frederick Borden, and the Minister of Railways, H. R. Emmerson, and of electoral corruption against the Minister of Public Works, Charles Hyman. For many Ontario Liberals, the allegations against Hyman, and the evidence of bribery and corruption which came to light in his London constituency, were particularly distressing. "Liberals in the past have been proud of their traditions," declared one Liberal journal, "proud of their accomplishments, jealous of their honour. They cannot afford to be less proud or less jealous today... If it is necessary to teach any of the leaders

[13] Willison Papers, Willison to George Beer, November 29, 1912.
[14] Stevens, "Laurier and the Liberal Party in Ontario, 1887-1911," chapter II; H. Blair Neatby, "Laurier and a Liberal Quebec; A Study in Political Management" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1956), p. 258.
[15] James Cappon, "The Principle of Sectarianism in the Constitution of Canada," *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 4, April, 1905, p. 436.
[16] Stevens, "Laurier and the Liberal Party in Ontario, 1887-1911," pp. 287-293.

or workers in the Liberal party that the party at heart is honest and earnest and jealous of its honour, the sooner the lesson is taught the better. Even if the lesson is a bitter one, eventually it will be a wholesome one." [17]

Aylesworth delivered a series of speeches throughout the province to answer these charges. He retorted that the Conservatives, fresh from their success with the cry of scandal in the provincial campaign, had embarked upon a similar course at Ottawa. "I do not pretend" he admitted, "that when millions of dollars are spent yearly every dollar is spent where full value is given in contracts of various kinds."[18] But Aylesworth declared that there was no foundation for the opposition's charges. "Show me one instance in which there has been corrupt practices by any member of the Government, and I will admit the justice of the attacks." [19] The Minister of Justice saved his strongest words for the Conservative leader, Robert Borden, reproaching him for his continued association with George Foster in light of the report of the Royal Commission on Life Insurance which had criticized Foster's handling of the funds of the International Order of Foresters and the Union Trust Company.[20] With what the Toronto *Globe* described as "the true ring of militant democracy",[21] he attacked the hollowness and pretense of Borden's recently unveiled reform platform. [22] The Opposition leader's promise of "honest appropriation and expenditure of public moneys in the public interest" was the height of political platitudes, while his electoral purity plank was already covered by the present election law. Aylesworth charged that Borden, his high-sounding phrases notwithstanding, was not above playing the political game himself, and that in view of a contribution of $30,000 by the Montreal newspaper publisher Hugh Graham to the Conservative campaign fund in Quebec, it was hardly surprising that the Conservative leader now wished to restrict such contributions to other than corporations, contractors, and promotors of companies. "No member of the Government," he proclaimed, "is conscious of political corruption to any greater extent, if as great, as Mr. R. L. Borden himself." [23] The campaign was an unqualified success, and in the election of 1908, the Liberals turned back the Conservative challenge.[24]

17 *Sentinel-Review* (Woodstock), October 17, 1906.
18 *The Globe,* June 15, 1907.
19 *Ibid.,* June 27, 1907.
20 *Ibid.,* February 27, 1907.
21 *Ibid.,* September 12, 1907.
22 *The Mail and Empire,* August 21, 1907.
23 *The Globe,* September 11, 1907.
24 Liberal representation in the House of Commons dropped from 39 to 37 as a result of the general election; and the party's popular vote was reduced

The extent of this success, however, was in some ways illusory. For the first time since 1874, the Liberals had failed to gain a majority of the popular vote outside of Toronto, and many constituencies in rural Ontario were clearly in jeopardy. Nor had the leadership question been satisfactorily settled. Although Laurier had strengthened the Ontario wing of the party by bringing George Graham and Charles Murphy into the cabinet on the eve of the election, the President of the Toronto Reform Association pointed out that "the old Liberals are becoming discouraged and disinterested and the leaders of the party in the province are not putting their claims before the people in such a way as to hold their own with the young men." [25] Particularly disturbing to many Liberals in rural Ontario was the feeling that a new and less responsible element was dominating the party and that the virtues of the old liberalism had been lost right of. Apart from Aylesworth, none of the Ontario leaders had gained their confidence. As one member warned, "Ontario Liberalism is on the expectant for something to happen. We are not going to be dominated by the new element in the Liberal party, as has been the case." [26]

Of concern as well was the position of the Minister of Justice. It was becoming apparent that Aylesworth's leadership in the province was far from secure. In the midst of the campaign, he had begun to grow deaf, and he told his constituents that he would be forced to retire from politics unless his hearing improved. At the beginning of 1910, his troubles continued when he became embroiled in bitter controversy with the leaders of moral reform in Canada, undermining his authority with a wide section of the Liberal party in the province. In December 1909, H. H. Miller, the Liberal member for South Grey, proposed an amendment to the criminal code which would have prevented professional gambling on Canadian race tracks.[27] The measure was supported by the Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada which represented all the major Protestant denominations, the Canadian Purity Educational Association, the Trades and Labour Congress, the Dominion Grange, and the Farmers' Association.[28] Laurier voted for the proposal himself, but he refused to adopt it as a government measure, and in committee the chief clause

by almost two percent. But in view of Conservative predictions of between 60 and 70 seats in the province, most Liberals were not unhappy with the result. Laurier Papers, J. A. Macdonald to Laurier, October 28, 1908; Laurier to Macdonald, October 30, 1908.

25 Laurier Papers, W. K. George to Laurier, August 1, 1908.

26 George Grant, *The Evening Journal* (Ottawa), January 17, 1906.

27 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, I, 1909-10, 96, November 16, 1909.

28 *Canadian Annual Review, 1910*, p. 239.

was defeated by one vote.[29] For the promoters of the bill, the villain of the piece was the Minister of Justice. Aylesworth had little use for the puritan conscience of Protestant Ontario, and he possessed neither the inclination nor the political dexterity to conceal his impatience. He maintained that the legislation would make a crime of something "which the ordinary sense of the average man does not consider a crime." Rubbing salt into the wound, Aylesworth derided those who supported the bill. "Very possibly before the end of this parliament, we shall have a proposition to make it a crime to play cards, or to dance, or to indulge in any of the other amusements which there are some in the community think constitute, very nearly, if not quite a sin." [30]

Aylesworth's attitude angered many Liberals in the rural and Protestant sections of the province. N. W. Rowell, a young Toronto lawyer and a leading spokesman for Canadian Methodism, informed Graham that he now regarded him rather than Aylesworth "as the real leader of the Ontario Liberals in Dominion politics."

> There appears to be on all sides the deepest regret, and on many sides the deepest resentment at the spirit and character of the speech of the Minister of Justice in opposing the bill; not that he should not agree with the principle of the bill, but that in voicing his opposition he should have treated with contempt the conscientious convictions and the sentiments of the church-going people at least of the province, and, I believe, largely of all the provinces. As a man said to me last evening in the car, whatever Conservatives may do, Liberals will not follow that leadership. They may not say much about it, but they will not vote or work for its support... There is the belief that had one of the influential members of the Government who are believed to be in sympathy with the bill spoken at all as strong in favour as Mr. Aylesworth did against it, the bill would have been carried, and however correct the theory may be that the government is in no way responsible for the bill, it will be difficult to remove from the minds of many that had the members of the Government who are nominally in favour of the bill, really desired that it should pass, the vote would have been different. The strength of the Liberal party throughout this country will be found in those classes who believe in the church and in religious institutions and who have strong views on moral issues, and who do not believe in legalized professional gambling, and while up to the present time the agitation has not been strong in my judgment it is because the issue has not been raised, and unless during this session something is done to retrieve what appears to me to be the serious blunder which has already been made, you will inevitably find an agitation during this coming year which necessarily will, by reason of the speech delivered by the Minister of Justice, more or less reflect on the Government however little those concerned in it may desire to do so. [31]

[29] Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, IV, 1909-10, 6587, April 7, 1910.
[30] *Ibid.*, 6543, April 7, 1910.
[31] P.A.C., George Graham Papers, N. W. Rowell to Graham, April 9, 1910.

The editor of the Toronto *Globe*, Rev. J. A. Macdonald, also rebuked the Minister of Justice. "It would be to Canada's discredit if, with a new start in a new country, free from the incubus of age long social custom, we were not able to lead the way into a cleaner democracy." [32] On April 15 the House reached a compromise that allowed legalized book-making but limited race meetings at any track to two weeks a year. Although the *Globe* and the Moral Reform Council were far from satisfied, they accepted the legislation as a step in the right direction. [33]

But the conflict between Aylesworth and the "church-going" section of Ontario Liberalism continued over another issue which lasted for several months. On March 4 Aylesworth announced the release of two men, King and Skill, who had been convicted of selling obscene literature, after they had served only two months of a one year sentence. Aylesworth explained that in his opinion the two men were not guilty of the offence with which they had been charged. He admitted that certain passages in the books in question, as well as in "that best of books that we all revere", might properly be described as indecent. But he declared that the books themselves, which included the English translations of Balzac, Petronius, and Brantôme, were classics "which are to be found on the shelves of our own library."[34] New evidence later revealed that salacious advertising had been used to sell the books, but Aylesworth remained adamant. He admitted that though his judgment might have been at fault, his opinion had been a purely legal one, which he still thought to be right.[35]

The decision outraged the "Ontario puritans." The protests were led by Macdonald in the editorial columns of the *Globe*. For Macdonald, the affair was another example of a dangerous tendency in Canadian society "to regard lightly offences against purity in life and morals." "Canada," he explained, "can do without the 'science' of depraved perverts or the 'classics' of the modern French lust-sewer."[36] Politically, the question was charged with explosive potential. "There is more political gunpowder in this than in almost anything else that has come up of late," Macdonald warned Laurier. "Following hard upon Mr. Aylesworth's speech on the Gambling Bills, it makes thing well nigh intolerable." [37] The Minister of Justice, he contended, had lost his hold on the Ontario Liberals.

[32] *The Globe*, April 8, 1910.
[33] *Ibid.*, April 16, 1910.
[34] Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, IV, 1909-10, 7185, April 15, 1910.
[35] *Ibid.*, 8350, April 28, 1910.
[36] *The Globe*, April 23, 1910.
[37] Laurier Papers, J. A. Macdonald to Laurier, April 19, 1910.

> Men who care nothing at all about the ethical interests involved, but who are interested only in the popularity of the Government, do not hesitate to say that Aylesworth can never be anything but a weight. If this is true, it is largely the result of his own persistent blundering in dealing with questions in which public opinion is involved. I say this with the utmost frankness... I do not propose to say anything against him, but I shall never have the least enthusiasm for him so long as he follows the lines he has pursued in the past... And more than that, the great body of the Liberal Party is with me and not with him. [38]

Macdonald was not the only Liberal to express alarm. As one leading Protestant clergyman explained, "the people of Canada are a moral people. They love purity in their homes. They will not tolerate a Minister of Justice whose sentiment and opinion would allow the circulation of literature so loathsome as to affront and shock the moral sense of all decent people." [39]

Throughout the dispute, Laurier stood firmly behind the Minister of Justice. He explained that Aylesworth had not condoned the sale of immoral literature but had merely expressed an opinion that the sale of books which were acknowledged as classics could not be held to be a violation of the criminal code. "I am quite familiar with Brantôme," he added. "It is one of the classics of the French language of the sixteenth century. It is coarse, as were the manners of that day but it is not lascivious. It deals with matters of rather risky character but he does not write with the view of exciting passion but rather of provoking mirth. I do not consider it half so dangerous for youth as some other books of almost daily circulation such for instance, as Shakespeare's sonnets or Shakespeare's Adonis." [40] He agreed that King and Skill were not respectable book-sellers and admitted privately that Aylesworth's opinion had been "too drastic." [41] But he was content to point out that "this is one of the many questions as to which lawyers can disagree." [42]

In the midst of the controversy, the divisions within the ranks of Ontario Liberalism were publicly and dramatically exposed. For some time a young and ambitious group of Toronto Liberals had been disenchanted with the lack of active and aggressive leadership in Ontario. [43] At the end of April, Hartley H. Dewart, a prominent member of the Ontario Bar, and the son of a former editor of the

[38] *Ibid.*, Macdonald to Laurier, July 5, 1910.
[39] *Ibid.*, Laurier to Macdonald, November 22, 1910.
[40] *Ibid.*, Laurier to Macdonald, April 21, 1910.
[41] *Ibid.*, Laurier to Macdonald, April 25, 1910; *Ibid.*, Laurier to Rev. C. W. Gordon, November 16, 1910.
[42] *Ibid.*, Laurier to Rev. C. W. Gordon, November 16, 1910.
[43] Graham Papers, H. H. Dewart to Laurier, copy, February 12, 1909.

Christian Guardian, charged in an open letter to the *Globe* that the Liberal party in Ontario was lamentably weak in its organization. For Dewart, the responsibility for the apathetic condition of the party's electoral machine lay with the Ontario ministers. "A commander-in-chief, even if he be as brilliant and skilful as Sir Wilfrid Laurier undoubtedly is, cannot be expected to achieve the success that he should without able tacticians between himself and the men in the ranks." But it was upon Aylesworth as leader of the Ontario Liberals and central Ontario's representative in the cabinet that Dewart fixed his sights.

> In the City of Toronto and the surrounding ridings we have suffered and are suffering as a party because the Minister who is supposed to represent this district is not a political force or even a factor in organization. A district or even a constituency may be lost if featherweight advisors are the main sources from which knowledge of the political situation is derived. The local Minister should at least be the mouthpiece through which the political views or needs of the district are expressed... The consideration locally that these matters have received and to which they are entitled is due in nearly every instance to the direct representations made by active Liberal workers to the Minister in charge of the department interested. Surely the public at large are justified in expecting the directing force of the Minister of Justice in these matters of local policy, just as much as Liberals are in matters of political organization. If our policy is sound and our views are right, as we believe them to be, the party leader who sees to it that organized effort and wise direction are brought to bear to achieve success performs a public as well as party service.

Dewart concluded that the country was entitled to the "best service of the best men" and that political prescience as well as sound executive ability was needed.[44]

The charges were not without secure foundation. Although one political observer had described the Liberal electoral machinery in Ontario during the 1908 federal election as "the most effective organization that had ever been known in a Dominion election,"[45] it had fallen into disrepair particularly in Toronto and central Ontario. "With the present organization" admitted one party stalwart, "it would be impossible to elect St. Peter to any one of our seats."[46] So exhausted was the provincial organization that party officials were forced to cancel a proposed policy convention for September 1910 because none of the local constituency associations had prepared policy measures for the organizing committee.[47] That conservative

[44] *The Globe,* April 27, 1910.

[45] J. W. Dafoe, *Clifford Sifton in Relation to his Times* (Toronto, 1931), pp. 341-342.

[46] Laurier Papers, J. L. Richardson to Laurier, November 7, 1910.

[47] The General Reform Association for Ontario, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Meeting* (Toronto, 1910), p. 24.

strategists could predict with such accuracy the results of the election in Ontario in 1911 was indicative not so much of the strength of the conservative organization, for the Tory machine had been unable to deliver significant results in 1908, but of the moribund state of the Liberal organization. [48]

Moreover, Aylesworth had done little to enhance his position with the political activists in the party. A master intellect, of high character, and with rare executive ability, the Minister of Justice had many deficiencies as a practical politician. It is one of the remarkable aspects of Laurier's career that, though an astute and calculating politician himself, he was more concerned with the administrative capacity of his political advisors than with their ability to master the details of political organization and to keep the party in line. Aylesworth had little interest in the intricacies of party organization, while frequent forays to Europe and the United States took him out of the political arena for months at a time. In cabinet, he seldom spoke on political matters, admitting to Laurier on one occasion that "in all such respects I am content to trust you blindly." [49] One of the reasons was his deafness which limited further his effectiveness as the spokesman for Ontario Liberalism. As he pointed out to Laurier some years later:

> My last four years in the House at Ottawa were purgatory to me. To sit there like a dummy when perhaps something I knew all about was being discussed – to know absolutely nothing of what was being said and then to read next day in Hansard speeches that I could have torn to tatters if I could have heard a word of them – kept me raging in impotent anger. And it was even more dreadful in council when there was something under consideration that I knew about or was perhaps specially interested in. I might talk a little while and then somebody across the table might say something – or even if you spoke, sitting by my side – I had no idea whether it was in agreement with me or in criticism . . . [50]

On the eve of his departure for the Hague Tribunal at the beginning of May, Aylesworth informed Laurier that his continued presence in the cabinet would be "a weakness and an injury" to the government and offered his resignation.[51]

[48] R. Cuff, "The Conservative Party Machine and the Election of 1911," *Ontario History*, LVII (September, 1965), pp. 149-156; C. W. Humphries, "The Political Career of Sir James P. Whitney" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1966). It is interesting to note as well that the so-called "Whitney Machine" was singularly unsuccessful in by-elections between 1908 and January 1910. Of the three by-elections in the province, the Liberals won two with increased majorities.

[49] Laurier Papers, Aylesworth to Laurier, August 31, 1910.

[50] *Ibid.*, Aylesworth to Laurier, October 19, 1917.

[51] *Ibid.*, Aylesworth to Laurier, May 5, 1910.

Laurier, however, stood by his beleagured colleague and refused to agree to his leaving the cabinet. "I am only too well aware," he explained, "that there are in the ranks of the party, some, who, I regret to say, are your personal enemies, but they must learn that, outside their very limited number, the whole party is behind you." [52] There were a number of reasons for Laurier's loyalty. The Liberals could not afford to have Aylesworth resign under a political cloud and thereby give credence to his critics' charges. Another factor undoubtedly was the failure of the younger Liberals in the province to emerge as potential successors to the Minister of Justice. [53] Moreover, Laurier had personal motives as well. The aging Liberal leader had become increasingly withdrawn from his political colleagues in Ottawa. The retirement of most of his friends from public life had contributed to a growing sense of isolation. Aylesworth was one of the few men with whom Laurier still enjoyed intimate companionship, and he was determined that this not become the victim of the political wars. But in spite of Laurier's determination, it was clear that Aylesworth had little control over the Ontario Liberals. At a time when new issues demanded party cohesion and unity, the Liberal party in Ontario was divided and leaderless as it had seldom been in the past.

In time Laurier might have been able to put the pieces together, particularly as Graham and the new Minister of Labour, W. L. M. King, began to emerge as political forces in the province. But the debate over reciprocity threw the party into complete disarray. From the outset of the controversy, the political climate in Ontario was not favourable to a reciprocity treaty with the United States. Although unrepentant free traders recalled the Liberal success in the province in the election of 1891, [54] the passage of years and the glow of prosperity had somewhat beclouded the motives and circumstances of the unrestricted reciprocity campaign. The economic depression of the late 1880's had given way to a period of unexampled growth and development, calling for tariff permanency, financial stability, and a minimum of change. Between 1891 and 1911, the industrial development of Ontario had greatly accelerated, and a population which had been predominantly rural, had become predominantly

[52] Douglas Library, Queen's University, Allan Aylesworth Papers, Laurier to Aylesworth, May 8, 1910.

[53] Three of the brightest lights in the Ontario caucus had failed to live up to Laurier's expectations. George Grant, the Ontario whip, had resigned at the beginning of 1906 after giving an interview to the Ottawa *Journal* criticizing the Ontario leadership. Leighton McCarthy had not sought re-election in 1908 for personal reasons, while Hugh Guthrie had been denied promotion apparently because of personal financial difficulties.

[54] Laurier Papers, W. D. Gregory to Laurier, January 14, 1911.

urban.[55] These changes had been accompanied by a growing confidence in the Dominion's ability to stand alone, and an increasing desire to avoid intimate connection with a nation which had repeatedly rejected Canadian overtures toward lower tariffs, and which, as the intervention in Venezuela, and the founding of the American Empire in the Carribbean and the Pacific had demonstrated, was following the path of expansionist imperialism. As Willison warned, "we would be selling our birthright for a mess of theoretical pottage put up by Cobden and Company, Manchester."[56]

Members of the Ontario caucus were divided on the issue. Aylesworth and Paterson were in favour of an agreement which they believed would substantially benefit the farming community.[57] But the majority showed little enthusiam. Graham was opposed to any "large measure of reciprocity,"[58] while King maintained that "the less done on these questions for the present, the better, both for the Government and the country."[59] Even rural members restrained their applause, contending that Canada should realize her own strength and not "grovel or feel in any way dependent upon the United States."[60] "We have developed markets of our own", one Ontario Liberal pointed out, "are enjoying good prices and have paid a tremendous sum to divert trade East and West, and should a tariff be arranged to alter these conditions it will be difficult indeed to foresee the result to Canada."[61]

There is no simple explanation for Laurier's determination to press for reciprocity in the light of this opposition. He always believed that a large measure of free trade with the United States would be advantageous to Canada and that once the question was placed in this perspective, the opposition would be overcome. Strident demands from western Canada for tariff relief and the desire for a new and dramatic policy after fourteen years in office made the proposition politically attractive. He was also concerned for the preservation of harmonious relations with the United States. The establishment of the International Joint Commission in 1909 and the agreement

[55] Between 1891 and 1911, the rural population in Ontario decreased from 1,295,323 to 1,194,785, while urban population increased from 818,009 to 1,328,489.

[56] *The News*, September 6, 1910.

[57] Aylesworth Papers, Letterbook, Aylesworth to J. F. Edgar, March 3, 1911.

[58] Graham Papers, Private Letterbook, Graham to A. Davis, November 9, 1910.

[59] P.A.C., W. L. M. King Papers, King to E. W. B. Snider, October 28, 1910. Both Graham and King distributed questionnaires to the manufacturing and industrial interests in their constituencies during the summer of 1910 and discovered that they were overwhelmingly opposed to a reciprocity agreement.

[60] *The Weekly Sun*, August 10, 1910.

[61] Laurier Papers, D. A. Gordon to Laurier, November 17, 1910.

to refer the problem of the North Atlantic fisheries to the Hague Court in 1910, were the marks of a new spirit of accommodation between Ottawa and Washington which had gradually replaced the animosity and resentment engendered by the Alaskan dispute; and Laurier was anxious not to place this in jeopardy. Since the Americans had made the proposal, he was prepared to treat it with courtesy and respect. As Grey informed James Bryce, the British Ambassador in Washington, "the necessity of saving the face of the United States Government will have to be borne in mind." [62] Once the negotiations had begun, Liberal leaders discovered the breadth of the American proposals, and they ultimately accepted a much more comprehensive agreement than they had intended. [63]

The agreement brought forth a storm of criticism throughout Ontario. In the vanguard of the suddenly mounting wave of resistance to reciprocity was a group of prominent Liberal industrialists, manufacturers and financiers. On February 20 eighteen Toronto Liberals led by Zebulon Lash, a leading Toronto lawyer, and Sir Edmund Walker, President of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, issued a manifesto opposing ratification of the agreement. [64] Reciprocity was not the first issue upon which members of the Toronto Eighteen had found themselves in opposition to the Laurier administration. In 1909 Laurier's refusal to disallow Ontario hydro legislation involving the expropriation of private power companies led many to the conclusion that the federal government approved a measure which they believed would seriously affect Canada's interests in the British financial market. [65] But for the Liberal establishment in Toronto, reciprocity represented a more direct challenge to its position of economic ascendancy throughout the province and the nation. The fears of industrial and financial interests for the future of Canada as an autonomous nation within the framework of the British Empire were genuine and deeply felt. But their apprehension was undoubtedly based to a large extent on the assumption that their interests were intimately tied to the continuance of the policies of economic nationalism which both Macdonald and Laurier had pursued. The identification of the Liberal cabal with the fledgling Canadian Northern Railway was particularly impressive. Of the eighteen, five were directly connected with the Canadian Northern or with its principal

[62] Grey Papers, Grey to George Bryce, January 5, 1911.

[63] Laurier Papers, Laurier to Fielding, January 18, 1911; King Papers, King to Arthur Pequegnat, January 30, 1911.

[64] R. Cuff, "The Toronto Eighteen and the Election of 1911," *Ontario History*, LVII (December, 1965), pp. 169-180.

[65] Laurier Papers, B. E. Walker to Laurier, June 4, 1909; J. L. Blaikie to Laurier, June 11, 1909; E. R. Wood to Laurier, June 17, 1909; H. Blain to Laurier, November 18, 1909.

financial backers.[66] And while Walker admitted that "the growth of Canada would in time do away with the loss of any carriage because of trade diverted to the United States," he was quick to point out that "we have been trying to build up a nation running east and west with a large and rapidly growing inter-provincial trade, and we need transportation of our commodities in order to make our three transcontinental railways pay."[67] Accordingly, on March 1, Lash, Clifford Sifton, John Willison and the Liberal M.P. for Brantford, Lloyd Harris, met privately with Robert Borden in Ottawa and presented the Conservative leader with a series of conditions upon which they would cooperate with the Tories to oppose reciprocity and bring down the government; and when Borden agreed to "use every possible endeavour to give them effect," they pledged to proceed at once to organize for the coming battle.[68]

As the controversy continued, political factors played an increasingly important part. They were particularly crucial because they aroused and brought into play many of the issues that had confronted Laurier during the earlier years of his administration. Already the *nationaliste* campaign in Quebec had led many in Ontario to question French Canada's loyalty to the Empire.[69] The rapid growth of French-Canadian population in the province and the demand by the newly-formed French-Canadian Educational Association of Ontario for "equal rights" for the French language strengthened charges that

[66] The Canadian Bank of Commerce and the National Trust Company.

[67] University of Toronto Library, Sir Edmund Walker Papers, Walker to J. H. Fulton, March 16, 1911. Another former Liberal who joined in the anti-reciprocity campaign, John Willison, had written of Walker: "He has been the chief apologist for the Electrical Development Company, the Toronto Electric Light Company and the Canadian Northern Railway Company. He has absolutely no public spirit except in the field of banking and in his own particular pursuits while his arrogance on questions which he does not understand is intolerable. Of course I agree that he is a man of distinction, of great service in his own field, and even a worthy national figure. But so many corporations centre in the Bank of Commerce and he is so utterly their slave that he is dangerous." Willison Papers, Willison to C. F. Hamilton, May 3, 1907.

[68] Willison Papers, J. S. Willison, Memorandum, undated. The Committee insisted that a new Conservative administration, should one be elected, should not be subservient to Roman Catholics in policy or patronage matters; that it should resist American encroachments on Canada's economic integrity and strengthen Canadian nationality; that Borden, in forming his cabinet should consult with Lash, Walker and Willison, to ensure that it be "so constituted as to guarantee the effective adoption and application of this policy, and that there should be reasonable representation therein of the views of those Liberals who may unite with Conservatives against the policy of reciprocity"; that Borden should bring men from outside Parliament into the cabinet; and that he should set up a Civil Service Commission, reorganize the Department of Trade and Commerce, and appoint a Tariff Commission.

[69] Laurier Papers, James McMullen to Laurier, August 26, 1910. It is interesting to note as well the number of articles on the *nationalistes* which appear in the English-Canadian Press, particularly after the Drummond-Arthabaska by-election.

the *nationalistes* sought greater political power throughout the Dominion. [70] According to the Ontario organizer of the Liberal party in November 1910, "the whole tory campaign in Ontario today is an anti-French crusade because of our leader's French-Canadian origin." [71] Of concern as well were the activities of the Roman Catholic Church. The prominent part which members of the government played at the Eucharistic Congress in Montreal in September 1910 and the struggle in Quebec over the application of the Ne Temere decree aroused Protestant apprehension that the influence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy was in the ascendancy. [72] And it was not without significance that the first point to which the dissident Liberals insisted Borden agree was that a Conservative government "should not be subservient to Roman Catholic influences in public policy or in the administration of patronage." [73] Reciprocity added fuel to fire. Fear that reciprocity would lead to annexation and the resulting loyalty cry were the catalysts which brought anti-French-Canadianism and anti-Catholicism to the surface. As Graham later explained, "three things militated against us in Ontario, first this Province is Protectionist, second it dislikes the Yankees, and third it is ultra Protestant, and it yielded easily to the cry that Laurier and the French-Catholics wanted to give us to the United States." [74]

The Liberals fought back with little success. Laurier replied that closer commercial relations with the United States would not affect Canada's autonomy within the Empire or lead inevitably to absorption into the American Republic. "This Treaty," he pointed out to one ardent and confirmed Imperialist, "will lead to added prosperity and may I ask you to point to me a single country which when prosperous and happy, was ever led to change its allegiance. Prosperity everywhere confirms loyalty." [75] But the lack of a leader in whom Ontario had complete confidence effectively undermined Laurier's appeal. The revolt of the Toronto Eighteen and the widely-held fear that the lowering of duties on farm products would be followed by similar reductions on manufactures were the expressions

[70] Ottawa *Citizen*, October 17, 1910; *The Weekly Sun*, November 10, 1909.

[71] Laurier Papers, J. M. Mowat to Laurier, November 5, 1910.

[72] *The Globe*, September 2, 1910; Laurier Papers, Rev. R. E. Langfeldt to Laurier, October 19, 1910; *The News*, March 28, 1911. It is difficult to assess the impact of these issues, but one Conservative organizer in Ontario informed Borden: "I also find a strong prejudice against Sir Wilfrid on the 'mixed marriage' question and this with the Liberals. If the feeling in my county is any omen as to Ontario as a whole I believe we will surprise them. Borden Papers, October 27, 1910. J. D. Reid to Borden, May 25, 1911.

[73] Willison Papers, J. S. Willison, Memorandum, undated.

[74] Graham Papers, Private Letterbook, Graham to J. A. Carman, September 27, 1911.

[75] Laurier Papers, Laurier to Hugh Graham, February 6, 1911.

of a business and financial community which no longer felt it had adequate representation at Ottawa; while the strength and resilience of the loyalty cry was in part the result of long-standing doubts and suspicions about the nature of Laurier Liberalism. Aylesworth did his utmost to ease these apprehensions. "There is not a thought, nay, not a breath drawn by Sir Wilfrid Laurier that is not single to the good of Canada and her people. He is a loyal subject, a true believer in that form of Imperialism which he thinks and I think is the true form; that Imperialism which gives to every component part the fullest freedom and seeks equally the well-being and closer binding together of the whole." [76] But Aylesworth's influence in the province had been greatly weakened; and the Minister of Justice had already advised Laurier that he would not seek re-election in the next election. [77] Indeed effective leadership in Ontario had passed into the hands of the Young Turks of the party, Graham and King who had few ties with the old guard of Ontario Liberalism. King summed up the situation : "With the exception of one colleague, Mr. Graham, who is much over-worked, I have no other who is in shape to do much work through the province, in the way of speaking. There are six of us from Ontario, two are too old and infirm to get about, one is deaf, the other is there mostly because he is an Irish-Catholic — and that leaves Graham and myself." [78]

The weakness of leadership in Ontario also hampered efforts to place the case for reciprocity before the province. Liberal leaders in Ontario were unable to provide the direction necessary to galvanize party spokesmen into action and launch a concerted and effective campaign in the constituencies. Plans for a public meeting in Toronto to answer the charges of the hastily-formed Canadian National League did not get off the ground. [79] Graham complained that "the discouraging part of it is the apathy of the members in the House, whom we have been after for weeks, begging them to hold meetings, but they seem to be standing it off until the roads will be so bad that there will be little use in calling a meeting." [80] Early in March, the Ontario Reform Association set up a committee to provide speakers for political meetings throughout the province, [81] and constituency associations were urged to arrange meetings to pass pro-reciprocity resolutions. [82] Conservative obstructive tactics in the

[76] *The Globe*, August 13, 1911.
[77] Laurier Papers, Aylesworth to Laurier, May 5, 1910.
[78] King Papers, King to Violet Markham, January 1, 1911.
[79] Laurier Papers, Graham to Laurier, March 8, 1911.
[80] Graham Papers, Private Letterbook, Graham to N. W. Rowell, March 15, 1911.
[81] *Ibid.*, Graham to N. W. Rowell, March 15, 1911.
[82] Graham Papers, F. G. Inwood to H. H. Mowat, March 29, 1911.

House, however, demanded that Liberal members be in Ottawa and the brunt of the campaign thus fell upon the lacklustre provincial leader, J. F. Mackay. In April, the death of Graham's son forced Laurier's chief strategist in Ontario to withdraw from the campaign for over three weeks, further decimating the Ontario contingent. Moreover, as the summer began and the pamphlet propaganda of the Canadian National League flooded into the province, the Liberal counter-attack had yet to begin. Graham was dismayed that "not a blow has been struck. It is discouraging here — not a single envelope... There is literature waiting to be sent out, but it will take a long time to address the envelopes after they come." [83] The sluggishness of the Liberal machines in Ontario was serious. As one Liberal organizer warned, "Unless a very vigorous educative campaign is undertaken, taking township by township and polling subdivision by polling subdivision, I would not like to do any prophesying as to the result. Our fellows simply MUST realize that it is their business to dig in and earn their indemnity." [84]

But little time remained as the Ontario Liberals suddenly found themselves in the midst of an election campaign. Their task was immense. Liberal strategy was designed to enlighten a misinformed and befuddled electorate. "I must confess," wrote King, "I find everywhere the need of the people in different ridings being more fully informed as to just what the nature of the proposal is. The press and the speakers are taking it for granted that the people know the agreement and that it is only its effect that needs consideration. The truth is our strongest side of the case is the agreement itself." [85] Liberal strategists believed that once the province was fully aware of the true character and extent of the proposed pact, it would readily see that there was nothing disloyal in it. [86] But as the campaign began, the Liberals had clearly lost the initiative. The argument that the agreement would open a vast third market to the Canadian farmer was no longer useful, particularly in the cities and towns where the consumer was convinced that greater farm prosperity would result in an increased cost of living. One Liberal candidate advised Graham "to say very little about the farmer, which I find has the same effect on my constituents as a red flag is supposed to have on a bull." [87] Efforts to present candidates from the business and financial community to counter the impression that the agree-

[83] *Ibid.*, Private Letterbook, Graham F. F. Pardee, July 5, 1911.
[84] *Ibid.*, J. Macdonald Mowat to Graham, May 29, 1911.
[85] *Ibid.*, King to Graham, June 26, 1911.
[86] *Ibid.*, Private Letterbook, Graham to F. F. Pardee, May 31, 1911.
[87] *Ibid.*, J. Macdonald Mowat to Graham, September 16, 1911.

ment would imperil their interests were largely unsuccessful.[88] Charles Hyman turned down Aylesworth's overtures to return to public life: "I could not hope to carry the city of London at the present time, the party organization is gone, the party itself only a skeleton of its former self, and enthusiam over reciprocity in a city constituency could hardly be expected."[89] In the end, Laurier and the Ontario Liberals were forced to concentrate on the British and Imperial question; and by focusing attention upon the dangers of a Borden-Bourassa alliance, they brought into play still further the racial and religious question upon which they were already so vulnerable.[90]

Laurier lost the election of 1911 because he lost Ontario. Of eighty-six seats in the province, the Liberals won only thirteen, a loss of twenty-three seats from dissolution. In spite of his efforts, Laurier failed to win in Ontario the support he felt his policies deserved. He had persistently tried to keep in personal contact with the province. His failure to find a lieutenant in whom the province had implicit confidence might be attributed to his instinctive preference for advisers with intellectual and executive talent over political astuteness, to his own withdrawal from his political colleagues, or to the vagaries of fate which took from him some of his brightest supporters. Perhaps no one man could effectively represent and speak for Ontario like Fielding in Nova Scotia, Blair in New Brunswick, or Sifton in the west. For its geographical extent, religious and racial diversity and economic disparities makes Ontario a province not like the others. But Laurier never lost sight of the importance of regional and provincial leaders in the Canadian political system. In the final analysis, they provide one of the keys to the collapse of the Liberal party in Ontario. Laurier's inability to secure a strong leader acceptable to his Ontario supporters left the party deeply divided and swung the electoral pendulum in the province toward Borden and the Conservative party.

[88] Laurier Papers, M. K. Cowan to Laurier, August 1, 1911; Laurier to William Harty, August 12, 1911; Graham Papers, Graham to W. J. O'Reilly, August 2, 1911.

[89] Aylesworth Papers, Charles Hyman to Aylesworth, August 19, 1911

[90] Graham Papers, J. Macdonald Mowat to Graham, September 16, 1911.